

# Black-billed Magpie

## Description:

The black-billed magpie is perhaps Idaho's most easily observed bird resident. Their large size, contrasting black and white plumage and exceptionally long tail make them easy to spot. In flight, they are especially obvious as they flap into long glides, their iridescent feathers shimmering in the sun.

**Iridescent Feathers** That bird is really shiny! Visitors from the eastern part of the country are often struck by this distinctive looking western bird. The head, breast, and under parts of the magpie are black with lustrous green iridescence on the wings and long, fanned tail. The belly and shoulders are white, as well as the primary feathers which appear as white wing patches when the bird is flying. Magpies are actually fairly large birds, but about half of the bird is the tail! The large, fanned wings and long tail help the magpie to navigate and fly at high speeds to mob hawks, ravens, and other large birds.

The voice of the magpie is a rapid, nasal "mag? mag? mag?" A magpie sounds like this:

[http://weaselhead.org/sounds/barb\\_beck/bb\\_black-billed\\_magpie\\_01.wav](http://weaselhead.org/sounds/barb_beck/bb_black-billed_magpie_01.wav)

[http://weaselhead.org/sounds/barb\\_beck/bb\\_black-billed\\_magpie\\_02.wav](http://weaselhead.org/sounds/barb_beck/bb_black-billed_magpie_02.wav) However, it is important to remember that black-billed magpies, along with ravens, are capable of mimicking other bird calls. So what you hear might not always be exactly what you see.

## What Color is the Bill?

The black-billed magpie can be differentiated from the very similar yellow-billed magpie by its black bill. In addition, the yellow-billed magpie has a very restricted range in California. Magpies belong to the family Corvidae, which includes crows, ravens, nutcrackers and jays.

## Messy Homes!

Watching a magpie construct a nest in certainly an interesting spectacle! The nests of magpies are messy affairs, large bulky domelike structures that usually have two entrances. A magpie's pointed beak and strong, tough feet are essential in the collection of thorny nesting materials. It takes up to ten weeks for a magpie pair to construct this nest which is only used by the magpies for a single nesting season. Because of this, abandoned nests are often used by other bird or mammals for nests, shelter or daytime roosts. All that messy work pays off for other animals!

## Will Eat Anything!

Magpies are scavengers and can and will eat almost anything. They forage mainly on the ground for invertebrates such as insects, larvae, worms, slugs, snails and spiders, and will sometimes forage in trees or shrubs. Magpies can frequently be seen riding on the back of livestock such as horses or cows and wildlife such as deer and elk searching for ticks to eat. Its sturdy beak enables it to pick ticks and other insects off large ungulates and for dissection of winter-killed, predator-killed, and road-killed animals. The carcasses of dead animals are an important food source especially during the winter months when other food sources diminish.

Aerial predators are the magpie's main worry and they are often captured by hawks and owls. Young magpies are vulnerable to climbing predators such as raccoons when they are in the nest.

## Reproduction and Offspring

Female magpies usually incubate five to eight eggs that are greenish brown, freckled, and blotched with gray for about 16-21 days. A pair often remains monogamous for several years. Studies show that male parental care is required for successful rearing of young magpies. Outside the breeding season, black-billed magpies are quite social, especially when feeding.

## Western Bird

The magpie is a western bird typically found almost to timberline in the mountains and foothills. Highly adaptable, it also visits a variety of open habitats including sagebrush, farm lands, pastures, grasslands, forest edges, stream sides with tall thickets and scattered trees, open woodlands, and urban areas.

Black-billed magpies are found in Alaska, western Canada south into California including the Rocky Mountains, and east to the Great Plains. Relatives of our North American magpies are found in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and Asia.



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*No Footprint*

Footprint

*No Map*

Distribution Map

1. **Species:** Black-billed Magpie
2. **Scientific Name:** *Pica pica*
3. **Population:**
4. **Size:** Length (including tail): 18-22 inches. Wingspan: 37 inches.
5. **Diet:** Insects, spiders, fishes, reptiles, amphibians, young birds and eggs, small mammals, carrion, and fruits.
6. **Young:** 5-8; called chicks.
7. **Lifespan:** 2-6 years.
8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia  
Phylum: Chordata  
Class: Aves  
Order: Passeriformes  
Family: Corvidae
9. **Hunted In Idaho:** No
10. **Hunting Link:**